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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: CABINET APPROVES MUNICIPAL ELECTORAL REFORMS, BUT
PARLIAMENT IS NEXT HURDLE

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[1](#)B. 09 BEIRUT 337

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Despite pressure from multiple sides to delay, the Lebanese municipal elections are still scheduled for June 2009. In January Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud presented a draft bill to cabinet containing a menu of electoral reforms, including measures to create standardized pre-printed ballots, set aside a quota for female candidates, directly elect council presidents and deputies, and introduce proportional voting. Although many politicians have opposed one or more of the reforms, seeing them as undermining existing power structures, the cabinet has approved a surprisingly high proportion of them. Baroud will now redact the bill and it will move to parliament, where many believe differences of opinion and opposition to reform could cause it to stall. End Summary.

BAROUD'S DRAFT LAW FRAMES DEBATE

[1](#)2. (U) On January 19, Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud introduced a draft law for municipal elections to the cabinet. Simultaneously, the cabinet voted to extend the term of the sitting councils by a month, thus extending the deadline for elections to the end of June. The cabinet also approved Baroud's proposal to reduce council terms from six to five years. Although most political observers speculated that the majority of parties would seek to postpone the elections on a technical basis, Baroud has consistently maintained publicly that his ministry was ready logistically to carry out the municipal election in the spring with or without the reforms.

[1](#)3. (U) Baroud's draft electoral law called for several major reforms: pre-printed ballots, a 30% quota for female candidates, direct election of council presidents and their deputies, and proportional representation in larger districts. Baroud, who is widely respected for his expertise in electoral processes, anticipated many of the cabinet's objections to the reforms and included comprehensive responses in the materials submitted to the cabinet. In fact, the careful construction of the draft law ensured that any individual proposed reform could be removed without affecting the overall law. In addition to the reforms actually proposed in his draft law, Baroud also voiced support for a constitutional amendment lowering the voting age to 18 years of age, though privately he indicated to us that it would be difficult to stick to the existing electoral schedule if such an amendment were passed.

CABINET SURPRISE

14. (SBU) Although the cabinet has made few substantive decisions since being seated in December, in mid-February it approved a number of Baroud's proposals during several sessions of debate. On February 11, the cabinet voted to approve the most fundamental reform -- the use of pre-printed ballots. Traditionally, candidates create and distribute their own ballots, which discourages voters from splitting their votes and allows parties visually to monitor voting at the polls. The proposal approved by the cabinet stipulates that Baroud's interior ministry (MOI) will print a standardized ballot for each contest and distribute the ballot at the polls on election day.

15. (SBU) The most controversial reform, which the cabinet approved on February 17, was implementing proportional representation in all municipal elections, not just in larger districts as originally proposed by Baroud. Unlike parliamentary elections, municipal elections have not previously followed a sectarian formula. Local candidates have run on negotiated unified lists that were often affiliated with local powerbrokers. With this reform, each council would be drawn from competing electoral lists in proportion to the percentage of the vote each list garners in the poll. Although some political figures, such as Labor Minister Boutros Harb, have publicly decried the proposed change as opening the door to paralysis on local councils, its goal is to increase participation by outsiders, since any list that obtains at least 6% of the vote will win

representation on the council. For his part, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) head Michel Aoun lobbied for linking proportional representation to the splitting of Beirut into three electoral districts, but the latter proposal has not been approved.

16. (SBU) The cabinet also approved reserving a 20% quota for female candidates on each list instead of the 30% proposed by Baroud. That such a reform measure passed in any form is surprising, given the general absence of female politicians from Lebanese political life. While there is no legal bar to female political participation in politics, social mores and security concerns reduce female participation, and only four women -- all of them from political dynasties -- currently serve in parliament. However, many more women are involved in municipal government than in national government. Even so, the barriers women face are underscored by several recent studies indicating that women are actually more likely to vote for a male candidate than a woman, believing that a woman has too many family responsibilities and mistrusting her capacity.

NOT ALL PROPOSALS APPROVED

17. (C) Despite initial internal disagreement the cabinet approved many of Baroud's proposals, but some key proposals remain pending. Contacts say that Prime Minister Saad Hariri is opposed to one -- direct election of council presidents and deputies -- because he views strong, popularly elected council leaders in the majority Sunni cities as a threat to his position as Sunni political leader. Harb told us on February 18 that Aoun's proposed division of the Beirut municipality, which Hariri and his Christian allies also oppose, would similarly not be approved.

18. (C) On February 17 the cabinet also gave its approval for parliament to debate Speaker Nabih Berri's proposal to modify the constitution to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 years of age -- something that did not figure in Baroud's draft law. Such a change would add approximately 283,000 new voters, according to Baroud. Some Christian politicians insinuate that the amendment would sharply increase the number of Muslim voters, but Richard Chambers of the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES)

estimated that the overall increase in the percentage of Muslim voters would be approximately one percent, most of it concentrated in Muslim-majority regions. Even so, Christian leaders are attempting to link the amendment to a proposal to allow expatriate Lebanese (many of them Christian) to vote. Complicating matters further, contacts say Aoun opposes Berri's proposed amendment -- despite the fact that the two are coalition partners -- fearing that Christian youth added to the rolls would vote against him. Berri has scheduled a parliamentary debate on the amendment for February 22 and 23.

DRAFT LAW MAY WITHER IN PARLIAMENT

¶9. C) On February 17, the cabinet directed Baroud to redraft his proposed electoral law to consolidate the approved proposals, then submit it to parliament for action. The bill will have to pass through parliament's defense, justice, and finance committees before coming to a floor vote. Many suspect that the law will wither along the way. Harb told us on February 18 that the cabinet approved the proposals so that it could appear to be active, but that all the disagreements aired in cabinet would play out in parliament. Baroud himself implied to the Ambassador on February 18 that the process in parliament would be slow but that "even if the law is not passed before the elections, we have put the ideas out for discussion." Aoun meanwhile has said repeatedly to the press that it is more important to enact reforms than to hold elections on time. Future MP Oqab Saqr told poloff on February 18 that the battle over the elections would begin with the February 22 parliamentary debate on amending the constitution, during which he predicted the majority would stage a walk-out.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Although getting the reforms out of the cabinet was merely the first step, Baroud is right that the debate has increased public awareness of the need for reform. The draft bill as a whole is not in the interest of any of the traditional political players, since it weakens the ability of powerbrokers to manipulate the electoral system.

Although the motivation varies from party to party and confession to confession, all sides have an interest in minimizing the impact of the proposed reforms.

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